

# Tali System in Sangam Age

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1. **Introduction:** About the prevalence of the practice of tying Tali in the Sagam period, two divergent views have so far been expressed, one accepting it while the other denying it. But, scholars belonging to both categories rely only upon the verses of ancient Tamil literature and the commentaries written on them in later period. The former category approaches the issue only on the lines of Aryan-Dravidian controversy, with the implication that Aryans imposed their eight forms of marriage, connected rites and ceremonies including tying of Tali on Dravidians. The latter category too, of course proceeding on the concept of Aryanization of Dravidians, but, asserts that Tali was there in the Tamil society. A critical study is made in this paper to analyze the issue. Before that, it is imperative to understand the man-woman relationship of ancient Tamils to comprehend the processes that led to establishment of marriage as an essential institution of ancient Tamil society.

2. **Kalaviyal and Karpiyal:** From the ancient extant Tamil work Tolkappiyam, the **Kalaviyal** (order and conduct of clandestine love) and **Karpiyal** (order and conduct of open married life) are known. When Kalaviyal created many sociological problems or rather when it was misused and abused by men, **Karanams** or sacraments were introduced to discipline the erred men, Karpiyal was expounded and Karpu extolled. Karpu, the highest and exalted virtue of women, generally translated as chastity was considered as one of the five virtuous ornaments of Tamil women, with the introduction of sacrament of marriage and connected rituals and rites, marital life was established, defined and accepted.

2.1. Though, there were two forms of union of man and woman among Tamils – Kalavu and Karpu i.e, union in secrecy and union in open (as explained), Tolkappiyar under **Agattinai** grouped different forms of love and union and they are **kakkilai**, **aintinai** and **peruntinai**. Kakkilai or **orutalaikamam** was one sided love and there were three forms under this category<sup>1</sup>. The second group aintinai corresponds to the five natural divisions of land, i.e, **kurinji**, **neydal**, **mullai**, **palai** and **marudam**. The third group **peruntinai** deals with unequal and abnormal love matches, union of different varieties and their evil consequences<sup>2</sup>. The last category was of violent nature leading to **madalerudhal** (riding on Palmyra branch for a horse), **varaippaydal** (giving up life for marriage) and other peculiar practices.

2.2. Karpiyal is definitely a form of marriage arranged by the parents of lovers and celebrated with ceremonies and rites. Perhaps, to overcome the problems of Kalaviyal, Karpiyal was developed to regulate love and union of man and woman. As there was degradation, as is evident from the verse of Tolkappiyam, the

learned men had to introduce more sacraments to impose greater moral and social binding in the marital life.

3. 'Karpu' had been defined as the union of a man, who had traditional right or privilege to accept (a woman) and a woman, whose parents had inherited prerogative to give her (for marriage) with sacramental rites (karanams)<sup>3</sup>. Thus, karpu was the marrying off a girl with ceremonies to a man of status acceptable to the parents of both sides. Even, if a woman went along with her lover on her own accord to his place, where her parents did not have the privilege of giving her for marriage, karanam was made mandatory<sup>4</sup>. Though, the karanam was prescribed for the union of man and women of three higher categories of the ancient Tamil society, viz., **Andanar** (priests), **Arasar** (kings), and **Vanigar** (businessmen), there was a time when it was applicable to lower category, **Vellalar** (farmers)<sup>5</sup>. But, after the appearance of falsehood and immorality, Aiyer / Iyer introduced karanam (i.e, the most elaborate ceremonies of marriage)<sup>6</sup>. Here, '**poi**' has been defined as the denial of clandestine love (kalvozhukkam) by man after having relation with her. '**vazhu**' has been defined as the act of not only denying the clandestine love, but also forsaking her after leading an open domestic life for some time. Thus, the circumstances that necessitated the introduction of sacrament of marriage are explained in Tolkappiyam. The, naturally the external symbolism would have been formulated to differentiate married women from unmarried women, and such external signs used would have been solemnized before parents, elders and others to mark the consummation of the union of couple as evidence.

4. **Marriage According to Sangam Literature:** The words used to denote marriage are **kadi**, **vadhuvai**, **manral** and **varai**<sup>7</sup>. Agananuru verses 86 and 136 give the following details about marriage performed in the Sangam period. The married life is known as karpu in Agattinai. The parents of both bride and groom would agree for the marriage. It would be performed at an auspicious time on an auspicious day on which Moon and Rohini asterism were in conjunction. Time was early morning. The **pandal** (marriage shed) was constructed in front of the home, spreading white sand. It was decorated beautifully with festoons and garlands. Drums were beaten; lights lit and Gods worshipped. The bride was adorned suitably and brought there, after having a bath by elderly ladies. There was also a practice of '**Silambu kazhi nonbu**' (anklet removing penance) before the marriage. However, not only unmarried women, but also married women were also wore anklets, as is evident from Kannagi and Kopperundevi. Elderly auspicious women brought water carrying on their heads. Four auspicious women blessed with children and with 'auspicious ornament' would enter the shed, showering flowers and paddy on the head of the bride and give her a bath. This bathing ceremony was known as '**vadhuvai**'. At that time, they would bless her to have a chaste life and she was always liked by her husband. The parents also gave their benediction to her. All who come for the marriage would be fed well. The same night the bride and groom would be left in a separate room.

5. **Marriage According to Past-Sangam Literature:** the details given by the post Sangam literature, the Tamil epics, are considered here. **Silappadikaram** portrays the marriage of Kovalan and Kannagi, who belonged to rich merchant families. Kovalan was sixteen and Kannagi twelve at the time of their marriage. The parents of them were eager to arrange for their marriages, on an auspicious day. Accordingly, the marriage date was fixed and intimated by auspicious women wearing 'pride ornament' (aniyizhai) sitting on elephants. On marriage day, drums and taboures were sounded; conch shells blown; white umbrellas taken out like King's royal procession and "**Mangala ani**" was also taken along with the marriage procession.

5.1. The marriage hall was decorated suitably: the top of the mantapam with garlands, inside roof with blue silk cloth, inside which the marriage stage with pearls. The day was auspicious as both Moon and Rohini were in conjunction. Kannagi, who was compared with the unparalleled star of **Arunthathi**, because of her quality of chastity, was wedded with Kovalan with Vedic rites conducted by an old Parppan. The scene of circumambulation of the fire by the couple was marvelous for the assembled. With the above description, the propounders of the theory that there no Tali was tied during their marriage, assert that the Vedic rites were introduced by the Aryans only during the process of so called Aryanization of Dravidians. But, significantly, they coolly ignore the following details mentioned in the verses. In chapter 4, of Silappadikaram, it has been mentioned that Kannagi did not want to any other ornament other than "Mangala ani"<sup>8</sup>. Again in chapter.21, she was described as 'vilangizhaiyal', i.e, wearing renowned or glorious ornament<sup>9</sup>. Before marriage, "Mangala ani" was taken around during the procession; after marriage, it has been mentioned that she was wearing it and she was described as 'vilangizhaiyal'. Therefore, without tying the "Mangala ani", it could not have been adorning her neck. And none other than Kovalan could have tied it. Hence, just because the Tali tying ceremony was not mentioned, it cannot be said that such custom was not there. **Perungathai**, another Tamil work also specifies how the fire was kindled by an Andanan, who was well versed with traditional Vedic rites and how the groom went around it with grasping bride's hand<sup>10</sup>. From the above, it is evident that Tali system was there during post sangam period. Now, to examine whether such system was there during Sangam period, and the ornaments used by the ancient Tamil women should be subjected to critical analysis to find out whether they could be used as 'Tali'.

6. **External Symbolism:** The ancient Tamil women were wearing various ornaments and jewels made of shell, stone, ceramic, glass, silver, gold and other materials. They include ear studs, bangles, bracelets, rings, necklaces, chains and others. Strings of pearls and "Pulippal Tali" were worn around the neck touching the breast<sup>11</sup>. Thin bangles were on the forearm and bracelets on the upper arm. Anklet, Silambu or Kinkini was worn on the feet and it was made of gold. Besides such ornaments for neck, ear, wrist, upper-arm, waist and feet, some specific ornaments were used and they were variously mentioned as **Valizhai**, **Aniyizhai**, **Ayizhai**, **Ollizhai**, **Manizhai**, **Ilangizhai**, **Seyizhai**,

***Pasizhai, Viralizhai, Teriyizhai, Nerizhai, Tirunthizhai, Punaiyizhai, Minnizhai, Vingizhai, Pulaiyizhai, Avirizhai, Vayangizhai, Chudarizhai and Nunagizhai*** in Sangam literature. Here, the important key word is “Izhai” and it is used with various adjectives qualifying its nature. It may be mentioned that significance is attached to the wearing and removal of Silambu or anklet and there was a specific function during Sangam age known as “Silambu kazhi nonbu”, i.e, the ‘anklet removing penance’. Anklets were worn by women since childhood and removed, when they attained puberty or at the time of marriage. Such function was known as ‘Silambu kazhi nonbu’. However, it should be mentioned that married women too wore anklets and hence it might not have been categorically used to differentiate married women from unmarried women. Therefore, the significance of “Izhai” has to be analyzed.

7. **Discussion about ‘Izhai’**: the word ‘Izhai’ as a noun refers to a thread, jewel or a lady bedecked with jewels and as a verb its meaning is ‘associate, intimate, agree to and consent to’. Now, let us consider the different connotation of it with various adjectives as mentioned above (The Tamil expressions used and where used are given in the table annexed with poem reference no and line):

Sl.No	Expression	Meaning
1	Valizhai	Young, pure or white ornament
2	Aniyizhai	Layered, orderly, beautiful or pride ornament
3	Ayizhai	An important or choice ornament; women
4	Ollizhai	Bright, good, excellent or beautiful ornament
5	Manizhai	Glorious, great or splendid ornament
6	Ilangizhai	Young or lengthy ornament
7	Seyizhai	A lady bedecked with jewels, woman
8	Pasizhai	Green coloured ornament
9	Viralizhai	Great ornament
10	Teriyizhai	A lady bedecked with jewels
11	Nerizhai	A lady bedecked with jewels
12	Tirunthizhai	Great or pride ornament
13	Punaiyizhai	Decorated, beautiful or new ornament; A lady bedecked with jewels
14	Minnizhai	Lightening or sparkling ornament
15	Vingizhai	Thick ornament
16	Pulaiyizhai	Thin ornament
17	Avirizhai	Bright ornament
18	Vayangizhai	Shining ornament or anklet (Silambu)
19	Chudarizhai	Bright (glowing like flame) ornament
20	Nunagizhai	Accurate, thin, fine or elegant ornament.

Of the above Teriyizhai and Neriyizhai are used to denote ‘a lady dedecked with jewels’. Ayizhai and Punaiyizhai denote woman with ornaments, besides the usual meaning of beautiful or new ornament. Other Izhais denote to special ornament according to its characteristic.

8. **'Izhai' represents what?**: The above expressions and their meanings have been taken from the ancient Tamil literature. To know exactly what 'Izhai' represents, the various expressions used in the respective contexts have to be considered.

***Paditruppattu*** describes how the women who lost their husbands removed their 'Valiyizhai' i.e, young, pure or white ornaments (5:15).

***Purananuru*** depicts how the wives of Cholan Karikal Peruvalavan removed their 'Izhai', when he died, just like Vengai tree (*pterocarpus bilobus*) which shed its leaves appearing naked (224: 15-17).

Puram also explains about women with 'Izhai' which could not be gifted away. The expression used is "***Igayariya Izhai***" (127).

Again it describes the women who lost the right of wearing auspicious ornament as "***Kazhikala Magaru***" (261). This poem accounts how the wife of Kariyadhi, a friend of Avur Mulangizhar followed '***Kaimmai nonbu***' (the penance of widowhood), after removing ornaments.

Four women, who were wearing 'Valiyizhai' and begotten with sons would bless the bride during the marriage as follows: "Without deviating from the quality of chastity, obtaining good benefits of life, earn name for the parents" (136: 11-18).

The bride with 'Izhaiyani' (Izhai itself mentioned as ornament) and sweating, was presented to the groom (Agam: 136: 11-18).

The hero entered the house like a thief, for whom his lady-love with 'Tirunthizhai' was waiting during the midnight, while their begotten son and mother were sleeping (Natrinal. 40:5-11).

The women with 'Olizhai' have been described as traditional wives (Kalittogai. 122: 16,17).

The hero married his lady-love with 'Tirunthizhai' on her soft shoulders after making a pledge before sea god that "he would be separated from her" (Kalittogai. 131: 1-2).

A wife has been described as the woman with 'Seyizhai' and embodiment of chastity (Purananuru. 3-6).

It is said that there may be redemption for the act of aborting pregnant women with 'Maniyizhai' i.e, glorious, great or splendid ornament (Puram. 34: 2,4).

The Pandiya king, Talaiyalanganattu Cheru Venra Nedunjezhiyan defeated his enemies. As he did not want to kill them before their women with 'Maniyizhai', he

drew them to their native place and killed them. Their women therefore died with shame (Puram. 78: 8-12).

Perisattanar, while blessing the sons of Pandiyan Ilaventhigai Pallittunjiya Nanmaran, exalted his wife as the embodiment of chastity like god and 'Seyizhai' i.e, with young or lengthy ornament (Puram.198: 1-5).

Madurakanchi specifies that women were with golden 'Izhai' and bangles (444-446).

The hero addresses her lay-love as beautiful lady with 'Valizhai' i.e, young, pure or white ornament (Natrinaï. 76: 5).

The old city blames the lady-love as the glorious 'Izhai' (Valizhai) on her shoulders became loosened or slipped down. The practice was that the Izhai should be worn properly around the neck touching the heart of the lady, who wears it (Natrinaï. 85: 2,3).

From the above specific references of Sangam literature, it is very evident that 'Izhai' and its other forms refer to an auspicious and important ornament that is nothing but Tali or Mangala Ani (Mangala sutra), though not such words were used in the ancient Tamil literature. It should be noted that the women who have been depicted above were all married with sons and described as auspicious women. No doubt, during marriage, as depicted in Agananuru, the tying of 'Izhai' is not mentioned, but its removal at the time of death of husbands has been mentioned not only in Agananuru itself, but also in other Sangam literature, as has been pointed out above. Definitely, without tying 'Izhai' around the neck of a woman, it could not have been possible for her or there was no necessity to remove after the death of her husband, unless it was considered as so dear to her as auspicious and unifying symbol of husband and wife relationship in ancient Tamil society. The woman, who followed Kaimmai nonbu to avoid sati, also would not have been asked to remove it, if 'Izhai' had not represented Tali or Mangala Ani (Manga sutra).

9. **Marriage, Izhai, Tiruvalluvar:** Though, Tirukkural is considered a post-Sangam work, it clearly embraces Tolkappiyam in principles. It not only glorifies the social acceptance of one man-one woman concept of marriage, but also the virtue of chastity. He has largely followed Tolkappiyar under the two main divisions of **Kamattuppai** (the nature of love) as Kalavu and Karpu. This confirms that in his times, the customs had not changed and the institutions re-established remained the same as that of ancient period of Tamils. It is well known that Tiruvalluvar does not mention anything and everything in the same place, but in various places with implied meaning. And if he repeats any point in the same place or at different place, it is not that he actually repeats, but implies another meaning. With the background of his couplets on Kalavu and Karpu read with **Ilvazhkkai** (domestic life), **Piranil Vizhaiyamai** (not coveting other's wife), **Penvazhiseral** (following of woman) and **Varaivin magalir** (women,

who do not come under the purview of marriage), the status marriage and connected issues can be understood. Valluvar refers to a married woman as 'Varaiyal'<sup>12</sup>, married man 'Mananthar'<sup>13</sup> and the marriage day 'Manantha nal'<sup>14</sup>. Except, 'Varaiyal', other references are found in Karpiyal.

9.1. Coming to 'Izhai', he uses the following expressions Maniyizhai, Aniyizhai, Seyizhai, Ayizhai and Oliyizhai, with the following meanings:

Sl.No.	Expression	Meaning
1	Maniyizhai	A lady wearing a glorious or auspicious ornament
2	Aniyizhai	A lady wearing an ornament
3	Seyizhai	A lady wearing a glorious or auspicious ornament
4	Ayizhai	A lady wearing a bright ornament
5	Oliyizhai	A lady wearing a choice or important ornament

Under 'Varavin magalir'(women, who do not come under the purview of marriage), he describes such women as 'Varaivila Maniyizhaiyal' i.e, unmarries women wearing glorious or auspicious ornament. In the entire chapter, he accounts the characters and evil consequences for having relations with 'Varaivil magalir' or prostitutes. It is very evident to note as to why the prostitutes, who do not come under the purview of marriage, wear Maniyizhai or auspicious ornament. Tiruvalluvar clearly distinguishes this, when he uses the expression 'Manzhai' to the lady-love in the chapter of '**Nalampunainthuraittal**' (the eulogy of heroine by hero), where she has been described as the lady with glorious or auspicious ornament, but this chapter comes under Kalaviyal. Therefore, during the period of Tiruvalluvar or the evolution of the social process as depicted by him, Izhai, particularly, Manizhai represented ali or Mangala sutra. This is confirmed by the other expressions. After co-habitation, the hero addresses his lady-love as 'Seyizhai. While appreciating the highest character of love, he calls her as 'Ayizhai'. And heroine enjoys in explaining their union, with their friend, where she has been characterized as 'Olizhai'.

10. A careful study of evolution of marriage, sacraments and connected symbolism as gleaned from the ancient Tamil literature (Sangam), Tolkappiyam and Tirukkural, the consistency and the underlying unity of such social processes can be observed. From the evolution of social processes, even the chronology of the verses and Tamil works may be considered, as the ancient Tamil literature / 'Sangam' literature is nothing but a compilation of poems written by various poets belonging to various periods. Even though, generally, they fall within the period 300 BCE to 300 CE, as has been accepted by the majority of scholars, definitely, there are poems belonging to earlier and as well as latter periods. The archaeological evidences recovered so far, such as beads, ear studs, bangles, rings, chains and other ornaments made of stone, clay, conch, glass, silver and gold clearly tally with the description of the literature, dating back to 1000 BCE.

10.1. The culture, heritage and civilization represented by such poems would definitely give a mosaic picture in the present order. Therefore, while determining the sociological processes evolved, utmost care must be taken to arrange them chronologically consistent with other factors. When the poems themselves are not arranged chronologically, the social panorama obtained from such interpretation with linguistic and racial bias cannot project a correct picture about the ancient Tamils.

10.2. Just because a particular social aspect, act or process is not mentioned, but its consequences are described elsewhere in the literature, it does not mean that such practice was not prevalent. Conversely, just because certain peculiar practices are not named, but adapted and adopted, it cannot be decided that such customs were also not present. For example, Tolkappiyar talks about four category of division of Tamil society, but the categories have been named as Andanar, Arasar, Vanigar and Vellalar and not as Bramans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. The practice of self-immolation of widows is mentioned, but it is not named as 'Sati'. The same trend is found in the entire Sangam literature. Karanam was not known as 'Tirumanam' / marriage, but mentioned variously as Kadi, Vadhuval, Manral and Varai. Similarly, Tali were known as 'Izhai', with its other forms. Tali system was thus present during the periods of Tolkappiyam, Tirukkural and Sangam literature, and adapted and adopted with karanams. And it was considered by Tamil women not only as an auspicious ornament, but also as an integral part and parcel of perfected married life.

## Notes and References

1. (a). A lover approaches an immature (Pedai) or mature (Perumpedai) girl to express his love.  
(b). The lovers are equally anxious for union, but is postponed.  
(c). 'Kollerukodal' or 'Erukodal' is marrying off the girl to the person who wins down a rude bull.
2. These divisions are compared to 1. Brahma, 2. Daiva, 3. Arsa, 4. Prajapatya, 5. Asura, 6. Gandhara, 7. Rakshasa and 8. Paisaca. Tolkappiyar under Kalaviyal specifically mentions about this division as "**maraiyor deyattu manral ettanul**" (120).
3. Tolkappiyam – Karpiyal – 190.  
'கற்பெனப் படுவது கரணமொடு புணரக்  
கொளற்குரிய மரபிற் கிழவன் கிழத்தியைக்  
கொடைக்குரி மரபினோர் கொடுப்பக்கொள்வதுமே'
4. Ibid. 191.  
கொடுப்போர் இன்றியும் கரணம் உண்டே  
புணர்ந்து போகிய காலை யான.



5. Ibid. 192.  
மேலோர் மூவர்க்கும் புணர்ந்த கரணம்  
கீழோர்க்கு ஆகிய காலமுன் உண்டே.
6. Ibid. 193.  
பொய்யும் வழுவும் தோன்றிய பின்னர்  
ஐயர் யாத்தனர் கரணம் என்ப,
7. Kadi-Agananuru-136; Vadhuvai-Ibid-166; Kadimagal-Ibid-244-5; Manral-Tolkappiyam-Kalaviyal-120.
8. 'Mangala Ani' – Silappathikaram - Madurai kandan-21:46 and 4:20.
9. 'Vilangizhaiyal'-Silappathikaram-Madurai kandan-21:46.
10. Perungathai-2:3; 9-14; 2:3:108-119.
11. P. T. Srinivasa Iyengar, *History of Tamils*, Madras, 1929, p. 225.  
He opined that when poetry first arose among the kuravar the bards naturally sang about the pre-nuptial lovers of hill-chieftains and the presenting their mistresses with leaf-garments (tazhai udai) and the teeth of the tigers which the hill-chiefs killed in the chase; these teeth were strung together and worn hanging from the neck and called 'Pulippaltali' from which in later times was evolved the gold tali.
12. Tirukukural-120.
13. Ibid-1221, 1226.
14. Ibid-1223.
15. Ibid-919, 1102, 1110, 1114, 1124, 1329.

### Annexed Table

Sl.	Izhai used	Reference	Song	Sl.	Izhai used	Reference	Song
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A paper presented during the 52<sup>nd</sup> session of Indian History Congress  
held at New Delhi from February 21-23, 1992.

No		no.line	No		no.line
1	வாலிழை	பதிற்றுப்பத்து. 5:15, குறுந். 386.3; 45:2; கலித். 119:14.	11	நேரிழை	நற்றிணை 40.3-4
2	அணியிழை	ஐங்.359:3	12	திருந்திழை	கலி.131:1-2.
3	ஆயிழை	நற்றிணை.75.8; புறம்.34.	13	புனையிழை	குறுந்தொகை.21:2
4	ஒள்ளிழை	கலி.122;16,17	14	மின்னிழை	ஐங்.455.3; பரி.வையை.135
5	மணியிழை	புறம்.78:8-12	15	வீங்கிழை	கலி.139.11; அகம்.251.3.
6	இளங்கிழை		16	புலையிழை	ஐங்.382.5
7	சேயிழை	ஏழாம் பத்து 65.9-10	17	அவிரிழை	மதுரை காஞ்சி.443-446.
8	பாசிழை	பதிற்றுப்பத்து.73:5,10. மதுரைக்காஞ்சி.580	18	வயங்கிழை	இரண்டாம் பத்து. 12.22-24
9	விரலிழை	ஐங்கு.235.3;	19	சுடரிழை	கலி.138.10
10	தெரியிழை	கலி.14.53; 49.1	20	நுணங்கிழை	ஐங்குறுநூறு : 258.3; பரிபாடல்: 228.38.